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Pentagon Officials Tell Congress Missile Defense System "Moving Forward"

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WASHINGTON, March 21, 2003—Faced with the threat by North Korea of a nuclear warhead reaching the United States, senior Pentagon officials told the House Armed Services Committee March 20 they are moving forward with a billion-dollar missile defense system.

"We have achieved a number of successes in the missile defense test program, which have added momentum to the development effort and bolstered our confidence that we will be able to meet the challenges that lie ahead," Edward C. "Pete" Aldridge Jr., Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, told the committee.

A PAC-3 missile circa 1999 at White Sands, N.M. The PAC-3 missile greatly increases the effectiveness of the Patriot Air Defense System in negating tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and air-breathing threats.
Photo courtesy Lockheed Martin

Aldridge, joined on Capitol Hill by Thomas Christie, DoD Director for Operational Test and Evaluation, and J.D. Crouch II, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, testified on the progress of a missile defense testing facility in Alaska and on U.S. missile defense policy.

Last year, President Bush ordered the Pentagon to field a "hit to kill" missile defense capability by the year 2004. The United States currently has no defense against long-range missiles and limited defense against shorter-range missiles.

Aldridge said the Pentagon's confidence in the program lies in tests done by the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), which has oversight of the program. Those tests, although criticized as being highly controlled, show promising results despite several misses.

In September, an Aegis sea-based theater defense radar aboard the cruiser *USS Lake Erie* was able to track all stages of a Minuteman III ICBM launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif. In October, the Navy destroyer *USS John Paul Jones* used its Aegis radar system in a test to track long-range target ballistic missile.

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Overall, MDA has recorded four successful tests out of five for the long-range ground-based intercepts, and was three-for-three for the short- to medium-range sea-based intercepts. The agency was five out of seven for short-range ground- based intercepts, Crouch said.

"When tests have failed, we understand what went wrong and have taken measures to correct the problem," Crouch said. "Some test failures are to be expected with advanced technology development programs."

But the Pentagon cannot afford to fail in this program. North Korea has had an active ballistic missile program for years, Crouch testified.

"North Korea caught us by surprise when it launched its three-stage Taepo-Dong I space-launch vehicle/ballistic missile in August 1998," he said. Now, he said, the Taepo Dong II long-range missile is capable of delivering a nuclear weapon-sized payload to parts of the United States and "could be flight-tested at any time," he noted.

Crouch said that, according to the National Air Intelligence Center, the Taepo Dong II missile might be exported to other countries in the future. Iran and other countries also are working on space-launch vehicles and intercontinental-range ballistic missiles that could be ready for testing in the next few years, he said.

"We knew North Korea was developing longer-range missiles, but we were surprised at the presence of a third stage on the missile," Crouch explained. "We have been surprised many times in the past by foreign ballistic missile developments. We likely will be surprised again in the future," he added.

The problem for the Pentagon is that some in Congress believe the military is moving forward too fast on a costly, unproven missile defense system.

Christie said that he "understands and shares concerns raised by members of Congress" regarding the precedent of field operational systems without adequate testing. But he told the committee the MDA must move forward with completion of the test bed to further missile defense development.

"If we don't develop an operational concept and an attack comes, then we will have failed in a most serious way," he told the committee.

The MDA says it will cost $7.7 billion and $8.7 billion over the next two fiscal years and about $8 billion a year thereafter to run the program. The Pentagon began building a missile defense test site in Alaska last summer. It is scheduled for completion next year.

The Pentagon missile defense plan calls for 20 ground-based interceptors to protect against an intercontinental-range ballistic missile threat. Those missiles will be stored in silos at Fort Greeley, Alaska, and at Vandenberg.

Crouch said the United States has asked the United Kingdom and Denmark for permission to upgrade early warning radars in their countries to track ballistic missile threats from the Middle East.

"The U.K. has granted permission, and we look forward to hearing from Denmark later this year," he said.

To address the medium-range threat, Crouch said three Navy Aegis-class ships will be equipped with up to 20 SM-3 Standard missiles.

"This will provide a highly mobile missile defense capability to help protect U.S. forces and allies and provide some limited protection for the U.S. homeland against shorter-range missiles launched from ships off our coasts," Crouch said.

For short-range threats, Crouch said that Army would continue to field additional air-transportable and mobile Patriot Advanced Capability-3 missile units with up to 346 PAC-3 missiles and 42 PAC-3 radars. The PAC-3 missile is the first upgrade of the Patriot system to feature a "hit to kill" missile that can help defeat chemical and biological threats.

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